DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 915 CE 084 094

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TITLE Learning vs. Performance: Implications for the Adult Learner.
PUB DATE 2002-06-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the National Adult Learning Conference (Orlando, FL, June 23-25, 2002).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; Adult Students; Cognitive Processes; Feedback; *Goal Orientation; Labor Force Development; Leadership; *Learning Motivation; Learning Strategies; *Performance; Personality Traits; Self Efficacy; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Self Motivation; Student Educational Objectives; Student Evaluation; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Goal setting is a dispositional trait that influences motivation to learn and to perform. Individuals with a Performing (or Proving) Goal Orientation are characterized by a desire to please authority figures, the belief that personal abilities are stable and unchanging, and a tendency to become frustrated and give up quickly when faced by challenging tasks. Individuals having a Learning (or Mastery) Goal Orientation try to develop competency by developing new skills, view their abilities as dynamic and changeable, and see mistakes and obstacles as a natural part of the learning process. Suggestions for determining and reinforcing a learning goal orientation include: discuss students' beliefs about the malleability of traits and help them understand that traits can be changed; frame feedback as diagnostic information rather than punishment; assess student performance without overusing tests, and instead, reinforce the importance of effort and challenge; pair learning goal oriented students with performing goal students in group and project work; encourage and reward effort and cognitive strategies that result in breakthroughs in learning; and select faculty who understand and will make efforts to appropriately challenge both groups. (Contains 14 references, a chart of cognitive factors that influence goal orientation, and a goal orientation questionnaire.) (CG)

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Learning vs. Performance: Implications for the Adult Learner[1]

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The motivational properties of goal setting has been accepted for some time by management and adult learning theorist (Locke and Latham, 1990; Houle, 1984). Exactly how goal setting influences motivation to learn or to perform has been open to debate. Having an understanding of the cognitive frameworks and situations that trigger such motivations would be helpful to practitioners and academics (Merriam and Cafarella, 1999).

The seminal work of Dweck (1988, 1999) and her associates more than twenty years ago indicates that goal setting is a dispositional trait that influences motivation to learn and to perform. Although her research focussed on children, psychologists are making the same case for adults in the workplace (Button, Mathieu, and Zajac, 1995), in higher education (Anthony, 1999), and across the lifespan (Heckhausen & Dweck, 1998).

In her research, Dweck gave school children problem solving tasks appropriate for their age and abilities. After the children successfully completed the first set of tasks, she gave the same group a new set of problem-solving tasks that were more difficult and beyond their age of readiness and abilities. As she observed these children with the second set of tasks, she noted that about half of the children exhibited maladaptive response patterns that included frustration, helplessness, loss of confidence, and inability to concentrate. A different response pattern was observed from the other group of children. These children evidenced an adaptive response

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Sample, J. (2002). Learning vs. Performance: Implications for the Adult Learner. National Adult Learning Conference, sponsored by the University of South Carolina (June 23-25, 2002, Orlando, FL).

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pattern of self-efficacy and an apparent enjoyment of the challenge from the advanced problem tasks.

Both groups of children were age ready and able to solve the first set of problems, but were divided into two distinctive groups given the more challenging problems. What explanation could there be for this perplexing dilemma?

Dweck and her associates determined that children approach learning situations with different goals in mind. One type of goal is designed to obtain favorable judgements from authority figures, such as teachers, in ways that prove abilities to others. These children, when faced with a challenge, become maladaptive and frustrated, often quickly giving up. These same children also believe that their abilities are stable and unchanging. Dweck named this goal setting approach the **Performing (or Proving) Goal Orientation**. This dispositional preference to goal setting is based on seeking and receiving favorable judgements about ones ability and avoiding negative judgements from others. Further refinement by VandeWalle (1997) resulted in separating out **Avoiding Goal Orientation** as a third variable.

Another type of goal results in children exhibiting adaptive responses in the face of challenge. Here the focus is on learning new strategies in which mistakes and obstacles are viewed as a natural part of the learning process. These children believed that their abilities were dynamic and changeable. Dweck named this goal setting approach the **Learning (or Mastery) Goal Orientation**. This dispositional preference is based on a desire to develop one's competency by assimilating new skills and mastering new and challenging situations. Several cognitive frameworks help explain the three goal orientations. These include implicit beliefs about trait dispositions, the value of effort and feedback, and self-efficacy. Dispositions such as abilities, intelligence and personality can be viewed as malleable (incrementally

changeable) or as fixed and innate (an entity difficult to develop). Those with a learning goal orientation will profess to the former, whereas those with a performing or avoiding goal orientation will profess the latter. Exerting effort for those with a learning goal orientation is viewed as a natural outcome of challenge and learning. It would not be sensible for those with a performing goal orientation to exert effort since they believe that they are incapable of mastering a challenge with their current abilities. "And if one does take the risk of working hard and fails, there is devastating 'confirmation' of low ability." (VandeWalle, 2001). Those who hold the learning goal orientation see feedback as a diagnostic tool useful for reconstituting strategies. Feedback can be viewed a detrimental to self-esteem for those with a performing goal orientation, especially if the feedback contradicts an image of competence to self or others. Self-efficacy has to do with the level of confidence one has to accomplish a course of action. A strong learning goal orientation enables individuals to maintain their self-efficacy in the face of obstacles and setbacks.

Implications for Human Resource Management and Development

Given the creditable research of Dweck and her associates, can we say anything of a similar nature about adults and their goal orientations? Nearly a decade of research confirms that adults have similar goal orientations (Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1995; VandeWalle, 1997). Research conducted in laboratory, classroom and field contexts strongly indicates that goal orientation is a viable explanation and predictor of learning and performance. There are several implications for managing organizations and developing human potential.

Motivation to participate in training and development programs is an important issue for developing skills and capacity of employees. According to Ford, Smith, Weissbein, Gully, and Salas (1998), employees with a strong learning goal orientation, when compared to those with a

performance goal orientation, demonstrate greater motivation to engage a variety of course content. It is likely that employees who are not motivated to engage new learning believe that his or her abilities are unchangeable, therefor all of the motivation in the world will not improve skills and abilities. Brett and VandeWalle (1999) determined that a learning goal orientation results in adult learners who stay focused on the task at hand, actively assess and modify learning strategies, and are more likely to transfer knowledge and skills to the workplace. Fisher and Ford (1998) examined the role and amount of effort in learning, and individual motivational influences on effort. Learning goal orientation was related to the exertion of more effort and the use of more complex learning strategies.

Colquitt & Simmering (1998) researched the relationship of conscientiousness and learning orientation to motivation to learn using an expectancy-valence model. They determined that people with these two personality dispositions evidenced higher levels of motivation during the learning event, both early on and during the instruction. According to these researchers, "individuals who were reliable, self-disciplined, and preserving were more likely to perceive a link between effort and performance and were more likely to value high performance levels." (Colquitt and Simmering, 1998, p. 662). They conclude by suggesting that conscientiousness or learning goal orientation could be used as a predictor for selecting employees for training that is complex and difficult.

Learning and Performance: Are They Mutually Exclusive?

We live in a very performance oriented society. School children must pass successive testing hurdles at various times during their formative years. Employers promise a premium for high performance as evidenced by emphasis on financial quotas and performance appraisals. Consultants hawk high performance improvement systems. And is there anything inherently

wrong in pleasing an authority figure, such as a manager? Certainly, there must be a balance, and unfortunately, there is a tradeoff!

If an individual has a strong performing goal orientation, then he or she will likely avoid situations and opportunities in which complex problem solving could result in failure and looking bad to others. A belief that his or her abilities are stable and unchanging would tend to reinforce a performing goal orientation. Those who have a strong learning goal orientation will likely invoke self-regulatory, metacognitive strategies and effort in order to grow and develop.

Adults may hold, to some extent, all three goal orientations and strong situational cues may overshadow an individuals preferred orientation. VandeWalle (2001) concludes that the culture of an organization may influence the selection of a specific goal orientation. This has implications for performance management and leadership.

Emphasis on short-term measures, such as quotas and shareholder gains, will send a clear message about performance. Embattled Enron Corporation had a policy of terminating the bottom 20% of its workforce every year. It would be difficult to maintain a learning orientation perspective in that kind of corporate culture. Businesses that have a more long-term strategy or who are involved in complex and dynamic environments do well to encourage a learning goal orientation when selecting, supervising and developing personnel.

Whereas managers may stress performance, leaders will likely stress growth and development, not only in the business, but also in its human resources. Effective leaders are risk takers who see errors and mistakes as a natural consequence of doing business. This type of feedback is seen as diagnostic, not punishment for errors made.

Goal orientation and associated cognitive explanations hold the potential for new insights and innovations in the management and development of human resources. Scholars and practitioners

will do well to explore strategies that enable performance and learning to complement each other.

Implications for the Returning Adult Student

Goal orientation theory has potential utility for advisors and faculty who minister to the educational needs of the returning adult student. Students returning to the classroom after an extended period of time as mature adults will have had years of experience "performing" for managers and employers. These students are recognized by their "performance" anxiety when completing challenging assignments and test taking. Looking good in the eyes of the instructor and doing what is necessary to "get a grade" places these students squarely with the performing goal orientation.

Other students want to make up for lost time in a different way. These students are not afraid to exert effort and search for creative strategies to balance the demands of family and work while completing his or her long overdue education. They exude self-efficacy and see challenging assignments as opportunities to expand abilities.

Recognizing types of goal orientation can be facilitated with questionnaires, such as the one developed and validated by VandeWalle (1997). Advisors and instructors, thorough observation and interaction with students, can also assess goal orientation. Here are some suggestions for determining and reinforcing a learning goal orientation:

- Discuss with individuals and groups of students (i.e., introductory explanation of class expectations and throughout the term) their beliefs about the malleability of trait dispositions, such as ability, intelligence, and personality. Help them understand that these dispositions can be changed through focussed effort, especially in the face of challenging assignments.

- Remind students of this quote attributed to Michael Jordan: "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life…and that's why I succeed.
- Frame feedback as diagnostic information useful for recalibrating strategies to solve problems and exploit opportunities. Enable the student to see feedback in ways that are not personalized as punishment, thus potentially damaging to self-esteem.
- Find ways to assess academic performance without overusing using traditional testing methods. Emphasize theory to practice projects that maintain the quality of the academic experience while at the same time stretching the capabilities of students. Reinforce the importance of effort and challenge knowing that a certain amount of anxiety will energize the learning process.
- Use group and project work that pairs learning goal oriented students with those of the performing or avoiding persuasion. Avoid a class culture that reinforces "looking good by giving the instructor what she wants." Instructors who diagnose the performing or avoiding orientation student should not hesitate to individually counsel him or her, and if necessary, refer for advisement and counseling.
- Encourage and reward effort and cognitive strategies (self-regulation, goal setting, feedback, planning) that result in breakthroughs in learning. The adage of "We don't reward effort around her, just performance!" does not apply to the learning goal orientation. Remember it is effort that energizes changes in dispositions such as ability and intelligence!
- Provide instruction during an orientation program for the returning adult learner on strategies that reinforces a learning goal orientation. Select faculty and adjunct instructors who

recognize the difference between the two types of orientations, and who will make concerted efforts to appropriately challenge both groups.

Understanding goal orientations is an important factor for those who develop academic and continuing education programs for adult learners. According to VandeWalle (2001), "individuals may not fulfill their potential when they doubt whether personal capabilities can be developed and when they are preoccupied with performance outcomes for the sake of competency validation." (p. 170)

Course designers and instructors who overemphasize performance in their students may short-circuit the self-control activities that are necessary for growth and development of abilities. Program and course designs must incorporate learning strategies that encourage development of abilities without sacrificing the self-esteem of the performing or avoiding goal orientation.

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Cognitive Factors That Influence Goal Orientation

Cognitive Frame Factor	Learning Goal Orientation	Performing or Avoiding Goal Orientation
Implicit beliefs about dispositions: abilities, intelligence, personality	Viewed as *incrementally malleable* attributes that will be developed with persistence and effort.	Viewed as *fixed entity* attributes that are stable and innate over time; not subject to change or development.
Effort, feedback, and planning	*Effort* viewed as an energizing vehicle that taps current abilities and builds capabilities. *Feedback* used as a diagnostic tool for correcting errors and refining learning and problem solving strategies. More likely to seek feedback. More likely to develop a *strategic plan* for complex projects and problem solving	*Effort* ineffective since dispositions not subject to development – why bother! Exerting effort risky if fails at task and establishes a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Feedback* viewed as negative evaluation of self-worth. Less likely to solicit feedback. *Planning* less associated with performing goal orientation.
Self-efficacy	Positive belief in one's capacity positively associated with learning goal orientation. Enable persistence and optimism in the face of obstacles, setbacks, and challenge.	Low self-efficacy associated with performing and avoiding goal orientations.
Self-regulation	Those with learning goal orientation effectively use goal setting, strategic planning and effort to accomplish work objectives. More likely to set challenging goals and pursue challenging developmental opportunities.	May avoid challenging goals in an effort to maintain positive self-esteem and to not look bad to others. Challenging goals viewed as unrealistic as abilities are viewed as unchangeable.

Goal Orientation Questionnaire*

Instructions: Individuals have different views about how they approach work. Please read each statement below and select the response that reflects how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Sort of disagree	Neither	Sort of agree	Agree	Strongly agree

_____ 1. I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from.

_____ 2. I often look for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.

_____ 3. I enjoy challenging and difficult tasks at work where I'll learn new skills.

_____ 4. For me, further development of my work ability is important enough to take risks.

_____ 5. I like to show that I can perform better than my co-workers.

_____ 6. I try to figure out what it takes to prove my ability to others at work.

_____ 7. I enjoy it when others at work are aware of how well I am doing.

_____ 8. I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my ability to others.

_____ 9. I would avoid taking on a new task if there was a chance that I would appear rather incompetent to others.

_____ 10. Avoiding a show of low ability is more important to me than learning a new skill.

_____ 11. I'm concerned about taking on a task at work if my performance would reveal that I had low ability.

_____ 12. I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might perform poorly.

Learning Goal Orientation	Performing Goal Orientation	Avoiding Goal Orientation
1 _____	5 _____	9 _____
2 _____	6 _____	10 _____
3 _____	7 _____	11 _____
4 _____	8 _____	12 _____
SUM = _____	SUM = _____	SUM = _____
AVERAGE = _____	AVERAGE = _____	AVERAGE = _____

* Used with permission: VandeWalle, D. (2001).

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